

The Alchemist



There are some books that go beyond being special. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *The Little Prince*, *Conversations With God* and *The Prophet* would all make the list. I'd like to add one more, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. It is the story of Santiago, a shepherd in Spain. He sets off to find a treasure by the pyramids in Egypt that is spoken of in a reoccurring dream. A story as old as the pyramids themselves. Along the way, he finds out that his journey is about discovering his Personal Legend, touching the Soul of the World, and learning what love is really about; as well as getting the loot. We learn as we travel with Santiago many of the valuable lessons of life, and uncover many of the mysteries. "The wise men understood that this natural world is only an image and a copy of paradise. The existence of this world is simply a guarantee that there exists a world that is perfect. God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom." Now come with Santiago and me as we stroll the fields of Spain, and ride on camel and horseback through the sands of the great African desert. And, learn as he did, "I'm an adventurer, looking for treasure." The adventure awaits! Enjoy!

The Alchemist picked up a book that someone in the caravan had brought. Leafing through the pages, he found a story about Narcissus.

The alchemist knew the legend of Narcissus, a youth who knelt daily beside a lake to contemplate his own beauty. He was so fascinated by himself that, one morning, he fell into the lake and drowned. At the spot where he fell, a flower was born, which was called the narcissus.

But this was not how the author of the book ended the story.

He said that when Narcissus died, the goddesses of the forest appeared and found the lake, which had been fresh water, transformed into a lake of salty tears.

"Why do you weep?" the goddesses asked.

"I weep for Narcissus," the lake replied.

"Ah, it is no surprise that you weep for Narcissus," they said, "for though we always pursued him in the forest, you alone could contemplate his beauty close at hand."

"But...was Narcissus beautiful?" the lake asked.

"Who better than you to know that?" the goddesses said in wonder. "After all, it was by your banks that he knelt each day to contemplate himself!"

The lake was silent for some time. Finally, it said:

"I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected."

“What a lovely story,” the alchemist thought.

The boy’s name was Santiago. Dusk was falling as the boy arrived with his herd at an abandoned church. The roof had fallen in long ago, and an enormous sycamore had grown on the spot where the sacristy had once stood.

He decided to spend the night there. He saw to it that all the sheep entered through the ruined gate, and then laid some planks across it to prevent the flock from wandering away during the night.

"Well, usually I learn more from my sheep than from books," he answered. During the two hours that they talked, she told him she was the merchant’s daughter, and spoke of life in the village, where each day was like all the others. The shepherd told her of the Andalusian countryside, and related the news from the other towns where he had stopped. It was a pleasant change from talking to his sheep.

We have to be prepared for change, he thought, and he was grateful for the jacket’s weight and warmth.

The jacket had a purpose, and so did the boy. His purpose in life was to travel, and, after two years of walking the Andalusian terrain, he knew all the cities of the region. He was planning, on this visit, to explain to the girl how it was that a simple shepherd knew how to read. That he had attended a seminary until he was sixteen. His parents had wanted him to become a priest...One afternoon, on a visit to his family, he had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn’t want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel.

“People from all over the world have passed through this village, son,” said his father. “They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived. They climb the mountain to see the castle, and they wind up thinking that the past was better than what we have now.”

“The people who come here have a lot of money to spend, so they can afford to travel,” his father said, “Amongst us, the only ones who travel are the shepherds.”

“Well, then I’ll be a shepherd!”

And he gave the boy his blessing. The boy could see in his father’s gaze a desire to be able, himself, to travel the world—a desire that was still alive, despite his father’s having had to bury it, over dozens of years, under the burden of struggling for water to drink, food to eat, and the same place to sleep every night of his life.

He owned a jacket, a book that he could trade for another, and a flock of sheep. But, most important, he was able every day to live out his dream. If he were to tire of the Andalusian fields, he could sell his sheep and go to sea. By the time he had had enough of the sea, he would already have known other cities, other women, and other chances to be happy.

Whenever he could, he sought out a new road to travel. He had never been to that ruined church before, in spite of having traveled through those parts many times. The world was huge and inexhaustible; he had only to allow his sheep to set the route for a while, and he would discover other interesting things. The problem is that they don't even realize that they're walking a new road every day. They don't see that the fields are new and the seasons change. All they think about is food and water.

It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting, he thought.

"You came so that you could learn about your dreams," said the old woman. "And dreams are the language of God. When he speaks in our language, I can interpret what he has said. But if he speaks in the language of the soul, it is only you who can understand. But, whichever it is, I'm going to charge you for the consultation."

"I have had the same dream twice," he said. "I dreamed that I was in a field with my sheep, when a child appeared and began to play with the animals. I don't like people to do that, because the sheep are afraid of strangers..."

"The child went on playing with my sheep for quite a while," continued the boy, a bit upset. "And suddenly, the child took me by both hands and transported me to the Egyptian pyramids..."

"Then, at the Egyptian pyramids,"—he said the last three words slowly, so that the old woman would understand—"the child said to me, 'If you come here, you will find a hidden treasure,' And, just as she was about to show me the exact location, I woke up. Both times."

"And this is my interpretation: you must go to the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but, if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man."

"I told you that your dream was a difficult one. It's the simple things in life that are the most extraordinary; only wise men are able to understand them. And since I am not wise, I have had to learn other arts, such as the reading of palms."

"It's a book that says the same thing almost all the other books in the world say," continued the old man. "It describes people's inability to choose their own Personal Legends. And it ends up saying that everyone believes the world's greatest lie."

“What’s the world’s greatest lie?” the boy asked, completely surprised.

“It’s this; that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That’s the world’s greatest lie.”

“My name is Melchizedek,” said the old man, “How many sheep do you have?”

“Enough,” said the boy, He could see that the old man wanted to know more about his life.

“Well, then, we’ve got a problem. I can’t help you if you feel you’ve got enough sheep.”

“Give me one-tenth of your sheep,” said the old man, “and I’ll tell you how to find the hidden treasure.”

But before the boy could say anything, the old man leaned over, picked up a stick, and began to write in the sand of the plaza...There, in the sand of the plaza of that small city, the boy read the names of his father and his mother and the name of the seminary he had attended. He read the name of the merchant’s daughter, which he hadn’t even known, and he read things he had never told anyone.

“I’m the king of Salem,” the old man had said.

“Why would a king be talking with a shepherd?” the boy asked, awed and embarrassed.

“For several reasons, But let’s say that the most important is that you have succeeded in discovering your Personal Legend.”

“It’s what you have always wanted to accomplish. Everyone, when they are young, knows what their Personal Legend is.”

“At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible. They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But, as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their Personal Legend...”

“It’s a force that appears to be negative, but actually shows you how to realize your Personal Legend. It prepares your spirit and your will, because there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, it’s because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It’s your mission on earth.”

“...The Soul of the World is nourished by people’s happiness. And also by unhappiness, envy, and jealousy. To realize one’s Personal Legend is a person’s only real obligation. All things are one.”

“And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it...”

“Why do you tend a flock of sheep?”

“Because I like to travel.”

The old man pointed to a baker standing in his shop window at one corner of the plaza. “When he was a child, that man wanted to travel, too. But he decided first to buy his bakery and put some money aside. When he’s an old man, he’s going to spend a month in Africa. He never realized that people are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of.”

“He should have decided to become a shepherd,” the boy said.

“Well, he thought about that,” the old man said. “But bakers are more important people than shepherds. Bakers have homes, while shepherds sleep out in the open. Parents would rather see their children marry bakers than shepherds.”

“In the long run, what people think about shepherds and bakers becomes more important for them than their own Personal Legends.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because you are trying to realize your Personal Legend. And you are at the point where you’re about to give it all up.”

“And that’s when you always appear on the scene?”

“Not always in this way, but I always appear in one form or another. Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen. There are other things I do, too, but most of the time people don’t realize I’ve done them.”

“People learn, early in their lives, what is their reason for being,” said the old man, with a certain bitterness. “Maybe that’s why they give up on it so early, too. But that’s the way it is.”

“Treasure is uncovered by the force of flowing water, and it is buried by the same currents,” said the old man. “If you want to learn about your own treasure, you will have to give me one-tenth of your flock,”

There was a small building there, with a window at which people bought tickets to Africa. And he knew that Egypt was in Africa... While standing at the ticket window, the boy had remembered his flock, and decided he should go back to being a shepherd. In two years he had learned everything about shepherding: he knew how to shear sheep, how to care for pregnant ewes, and how to protect the sheep from wolves. He knew all the fields and pastures of Andalusia. And he knew what was the fair price for every one of his animals.

The wind began to pick up, He knew that wind: people called it the levanter, because on it the Moors had come from the Levant at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

The levanter increased in intensity. Here I am, between my flock and my treasure, the boy thought. He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have. There was also the merchant's daughter, but she wasn't as important as his flock, because she didn't depend on him. Maybe she didn't even remember him. He was sure that it made no difference to her on which day he appeared: for her, every day was the same, and when each day is the same as the next, it's because people fail to recognize the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises.

"That baker..." he said to himself, without completing the thought. The levanter was still getting stronger, and he felt its force on his face. That wind had brought the Moors, yes, but it had also brought the smell of the desert and of veiled women. It had brought with it the sweat and the dreams of men who had once left to search for the unknown, and for gold and adventure—and for the Pyramids. The boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind, and saw that he could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself. The sheep, the merchant's daughter, and the fields of Andalusia were only steps along the way to his Personal Legend.

The next day, the boy met the old man at noon. He brought six sheep with him.

"I'm surprised," the boy said. "My friend bought all the other sheep immediately. He said that he had always dreamed of being a shepherd, and that it was a good omen."

"That's the way it always is," said the old man. "It's called the principle of favorability. When you play cards the first time, you are almost sure to win. Beginner's luck."

"Why is that?"

"Because there is a force that wants you to realize your Personal Legend; it whets your appetite with a taste of success."

“In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you.”

“Take these,” said the old man, holding out a white stone and a black stone that had been embedded at the center of the breastplate. “They are called Urim and Thummim. The black signifies ‘yes,’ and the white ‘no.’ When you are unable to read the omens, they will help you to do so. Always ask an objective question.

“But, if you can, try to make your own decisions. The treasure is at the Pyramids; that you already knew. But I had to insist on the payment of six sheep because I helped you to make your decision.”

“Don’t forget that everything you deal with is only one thing and nothing else. And don’t forget the language of omens, And, above all, don’t forget to follow your Personal Legend through to its conclusion.”

“But before I go, I want to tell you a little story.

“A certain shopkeeper sent his son to learn about the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world. The lad wandered through the desert for forty days, and finally came upon a beautiful castle, high atop a mountain. It was there that the wise man lived.

“Rather than finding a saintly man, though, our hero, on entering the main room of the castle, saw a hive of activity: tradesmen came and went, people were conversing in the corners, a small orchestra was playing soft music, and there was a table covered with platters of the most delicious food in that part of the world. The wise man conversed with every one, and the boy had to wait for two hours before it was his turn to be given the man’s attention.

“The wise man listened attentively to the boy’s explanation of why he had come, but told him that he didn’t have time just then to explain the secret of happiness. He suggested that the boy look around the palace and return in two hours.

“‘Meanwhile, I want to ask you to do something,’ said the wise man, handing the boy a teaspoon that held two drops of oil. ‘As you wander around, carry this spoon with you without allowing the oil to spill.’

“The boy began climbing and descending the many stairways of the palace, keeping his eyes fixed on the spoon. After two hours, he returned to the room where the wise man was.

“‘Well,’ asked the wise man, ‘did you see the Persian tapestries that are hanging in my dining hall? Did you see the garden that it took the master gardener ten years to create?’

Did you notice the beautiful parchments in my library?’

“The boy was embarrassed, and confessed that he had observed nothing. His only concern had been not to spill the oil that the wise man had entrusted to him.

“‘Then go back and observe the marvels of my world,’ said the wise man. ‘You cannot trust a man if you don’t know his house.’

“Relieved, the boy picked up the spoon and returned to his exploration of the palace, this time observing all of the works of art on the ceilings and the walls. He saw the gardens, the mountains all around him, the beauty of the flowers, and the taste with which everything had been selected. Upon returning to the wise man, he related in detail everything he had seen.

“‘But where are the drops of oil I entrusted to you?’ asked the wise man.

“Looking down at the spoon he held, the boy saw that the oil was gone.

“‘Well, there is only one piece of advice I can give you,’ said the wisest of wise men. ‘The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon.’”

The shepherd said nothing. He had understood the story the old king had told him. A shepherd may like to travel, but he should never forget about his sheep.

If God leads the sheep so well, he will also lead a man...

He recalled that when the sun had risen that morning, he was on another continent, still a shepherd with sixty sheep, and looking forward to meeting with a girl. That morning he had known everything that was going to happen to him as he walked through the familiar fields. But now, as the sun began to set, he was in a different country, a stranger in a strange land, where he couldn’t even speak the language. He was no longer a shepherd, and he had nothing, not even the money to return and start everything over.

When I had my sheep, I was happy, and I made those around me happy. People saw me coming and welcomed me, he thought. But now I’m sad and alone. I’m going to become bitter and distrustful of people because one person betrayed me. I’m going to hate those who have found their treasure because I never found mine. And I’m going to hold on to what little I have, because I’m too insignificant to conquer the world.

Now he understood why the owner of the bar had been so upset; he was trying to tell him not to trust that man. “I’m like everyone else—I see the world in terms of what I would like to see happen, not what actually does.”

“When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it,” he had said.

The boy was trying to understand the truth of what the old man had said. There he was in the empty marketplace, without a cent to his name, and with not a sheep to guard through the night.

“Learn to recognize omens, and follow them,” the old king had said.

An omen. The boy smiled to himself. He picked up the two stones and put them back in his pouch. He didn’t consider mending the hole—the stones could fall through any time they wanted. He had learned that there were certain things one shouldn’t ask about, so as not to flee from one’s own Personal Legend. “I promised that I would make my own decisions,” he said to himself.

...he realized that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure.

“I’m an adventurer, looking for treasure,” he said to himself.

But instead of being saddened, he was happy. He no longer had to seek out food and water for the sheep; he could go in search of his treasure, instead. He had not a cent in his pocket, but he had faith. He had decided, the night before, that he would be as much an adventurer as the ones he had admired in books.

The candy seller had a smile on his face: he was happy, aware of what his life was about, and ready to begin a day’s work. His smile reminded the boy of the old man—the mysterious old king he had met. “This candy merchant isn’t making candy so that later he can travel or marry a shopkeeper’s daughter. He’s doing it because it’s what he wants to do,” thought the boy. He realized that he could do the same thing the old man had done—sense whether a person was near to or far from his Personal Legend. Just by looking at them. “It’s easy, and yet I’ve never done it before,” he thought.

When he had gone only a short distance, he realized that, while they were erecting the stall, one of them had spoken Arabic and the other Spanish.

And they had understood each other perfectly well.

There must be a language that doesn’t depend on words, the boy thought. I’ve already had that experience with my sheep, and now it’s happening with people.

If I can learn to understand this language without words, I can learn to understand the

world.

“All things are one,” the old man had said.

...the crystal merchant had no choice. He had lived thirty years of his life buying and selling crystal pieces, and now it was too late to do anything else.

“I can clean up those glasses in the window, if you want,” said the boy. “The way they look now, nobody is going to want to buy them.”

The man looked at him without responding.

“In exchange, you could give me something to eat.”

The man still said nothing, and the boy sensed that he was going to have to make a decision—Taking the jacket out, he began to clean the glasses. In half an hour, he had cleaned all the glasses in the window, and, as he was doing so, two customers had entered the shop and bought some crystal.

“You didn’t have to do any cleaning,” he said, “The Koran requires me to feed a hungry person.”

“Well then, why did you let me do it?” the boy asked.

“Because the crystal was dirty. And both you and I needed to cleanse our minds of negative thoughts.”

“Do you want to go to work for me?” the merchant asked.

“I can work for the rest of today,” the boy answered. “I’ll work all night, until dawn, and I’ll clean every piece of crystal in your shop. In return, I need money to get to Egypt tomorrow.”

The merchant laughed. “Even if you cleaned my crystal for an entire year...even if you earned a good commission selling every piece, you would still have to borrow money to get to Egypt. There are thousands of kilometers of desert between here and there.”

There was a moment of silence so profound that it seemed the city was asleep. No sound from the bazaars, no arguments among the merchants, no men climbing to the towers to chant. No hope, no adventure, no old kings or Personal Legends, no treasure, and no Pyramids. It was as if the world had fallen silent because the boy’s soul had. He sat there, staring blankly through the door of the cafe, wishing that he had died, and that everything would end forever at that moment.

"I'll work for you," he said.

And after another long silence, he added, "I need money to buy some sheep."

"I'd like to build a display case for the crystal," the boy said to the merchant. "We could place it outside, and attract those people who pass at the bottom of the hill."

"I've never had one before," the merchant answered. "People will pass by and bump into it, and pieces will be broken."

"Well, when I took my sheep through the fields some of them might have died if we had come upon a snake. But that's the way life is with sheep and with shepherds."

"Business has really improved," he said to the boy, after the customer had left. "I'm doing much better, and soon you'll be able to return to your sheep. Why ask more out of life?"

"Because we have to respond to omens," the boy said, almost without meaning to; then he regretted what he had said, because the merchant had never met the king.

"It's called the principle of favorability, beginner's luck. Because life wants you to achieve your Personal Legend," the old king had said.

"The fifth obligation of every Muslim is a pilgrimage. We are obliged, at least once in our lives, to visit the holy city of Mecca.

"Mecca is a lot farther away than the Pyramids. When I was young, all I wanted to do was put together enough money to start this shop. I thought that someday I'd be rich, and could go to Mecca. I began to make some money, but I could never bring myself to leave someone in charge of the shop; the crystals are delicate things. At the same time, people were passing my shop all the time, heading for Mecca. Some of them were rich pilgrims, traveling in caravans with servants and camels, but most of the people making the pilgrimage were poorer than I.

"All who went there were happy at having done so. They placed the symbols of the pilgrimage on the doors of their houses. One of them, a cobbler who made his living mending boots, said that he had traveled for almost a year through the desert, but that he got more tired when he had to walk through the streets of Tangier buying his leather."

"Well, why don't you go to Mecca now?" asked the boy.

"Because it's the thought of Mecca that keeps me alive. That's what helps me face these days that are all the same, these mute crystals on the shelves, and lunch and dinner at that same horrible cafe. I'm afraid that if my dream is realized, I'll have no reason to go on

living.”

The boy estimated that, if he worked for six more months, he could return to Spain and buy sixty sheep, and yet another sixty. In less than a year, he would have doubled his flock, and he would be able to do business with the Arabs, because he was now able to speak their strange language.

He was proud of himself. He had learned some important things, like how to deal in crystal, and about the language without words...and about omens.

“I’ve had this shop for thirty years. I know good crystal from bad, and everything else there is to know about crystal, I know its dimensions and how it behaves. If we serve tea in crystal, the shop is going to expand. And then I’ll have to change my way of life.”

“Well, isn’t that good?”

“I’m already used to the way things are. Before you came, I was thinking about how much time I had wasted in the same place, while my friends had moved on, and either went bankrupt or did better than they had before. It made me very depressed. Now, I can see that it hasn’t been too bad. The shop is exactly the size I always wanted it to be. I don’t want to change anything, because I don’t know how to deal with change. I’m used to the way I am.”

“You have been a real blessing to me. Today, I understand something I didn’t see before: every blessing ignored becomes a curse. I don’t want anything else in life. But you are forcing me to look at wealth and at horizons I have never known. Now that I have seen them, and now that I see how immense my possibilities are. I’m going to feel worse than I did before you arrived. Because I know the things I should be able to accomplish, and I don’t want to do so.”

“Maktub” the merchant said, finally.

“What does that mean?”

“You would have to have been born an Arab to understand,” he answered. “But in your language it would be something like ‘It is written.’”

And, as he smothered the coals in the hookah, he told the boy that he could begin to sell tea in the crystal glasses. Sometimes, there’s just no way to hold back the river.

“I’m leaving today,” said the boy. “I have the money I need to buy my sheep. And you have the money you need to go to Mecca.”

The old man said nothing.

“Will you give me your blessing?” asked the boy. “You have helped me.” The man continued to prepare his tea, saying nothing. Then he turned to the boy.

“I am proud of you,” he said. “You brought a new feeling into my crystal shop. But you know that I’m not going to go to Mecca. Just as you know that you’re not going to buy your sheep.”

“Who told you that?” asked the boy, startled.

“Maktub” said the old crystal merchant.

And he gave the boy his blessing.

I’m going to go back to doing just what I did before, the boy thought. Even though the sheep didn’t teach me to speak Arabic.

But the sheep had taught him something even more important: that there was a language in the world that everyone understood, a language the boy had used throughout the time that he was trying to improve things at the shop. It was the language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose, and as part of a search for something believed in and desired. Tangier was no longer a strange city, and he felt that, just as he had conquered this place, he could conquer the world.

“When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it,” the old king had said.

From where he stood, he saw for the first time that the old merchant’s hair was very much like the hair of the old king. He remembered the smile of the candy seller, on his first day in Tangier, when he had nothing to eat and nowhere to go—that smile had also been like the old king’s smile.

“But I’m going back to the fields that I know, to take care of my flock again.” He said that to himself with certainty, but he was no longer happy with his decision. He had worked for an entire year to make a dream come true, and that dream, minute by minute, was becoming less important. Maybe because that wasn’t really his dream.

Who knows...maybe it’s better to be like the crystal merchant: never go to Mecca, and just go through life wanting to do so, he thought, again trying to convince himself.

The hills of Andalusia were only two hours away, but there was an entire desert between him and the Pyramids. Yet the boy felt that there was another way to regard his situation:

he was actually two hours closer to his treasure...the fact that the two hours had stretched into an entire year didn't matter.

I know why I want to get back to my flock, he thought. I understand sheep; they're no longer a problem, and they can be good friends. On the other hand, I don't know if the desert can be a friend, and it's in the desert that I have to search for my treasure. If I don't find it, I can always go home. I finally have enough money, and all the time I need. Why not! He suddenly felt tremendously happy.

He could always go back to being a shepherd. He could always become a crystal salesman again. Maybe the world had other hidden treasures, but he had a dream, and he had met with a king. That doesn't happen to just anyone!

"I am always nearby, when someone wants to realize their Personal Legend," the old king had told him.

...making a decision was only the beginning of things. When someone makes a decision, he is really diving into a strong current that will carry him to places he had never dreamed of when he first made the decision.

"Everything in life is an omen," said the Englishman, now closing the journal he was reading. "There is a universal language, understood by everybody, but already forgotten, I am in search of that universal language, among other things. That's why I'm here. I have to find a man who knows that universal language. An alchemist."

"That's a good luck omen," the Englishman said, after the fat Arab had gone out. "If I could, I'd write a huge encyclopedia just about the words luck and coincidence. It's with those words that the universal language is written."

"I'm looking for a treasure," said the boy, and he immediately regretted having said it. But the Englishman appeared not to attach any importance to it.

"In a way, so am I," he said.

The closer one gets to realizing his Personal Legend, the more that Personal Legend becomes his true reason for being, thought the boy.

I've learned things from the sheep, and I've learned things from crystal, he thought. I can learn something from the desert, too. It seems old and wise.

“Hunches,” his mother used to call them. The boy was beginning to understand that intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it’s all written there.

“Maktub“ the boy said, remembering the crystal merchant.

“We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it’s our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand.”

“That’s the principle that governs all things,” he said. “In alchemy, it’s called the Soul of the World. When you want something with all your heart, that’s when you are closest to the Soul of the World, It’s always a positive force.”

He also said that this was not just a human gift, that everything on the face of the earth had a soul, whether mineral, vegetable, or animal—or even just a simple thought.

“Everything on earth is being continuously transformed, because the earth is alive...and it has a soul. We are part of that soul, so we rarely recognize that it is working for us. But in the crystal shop you probably realized that even the glasses were collaborating in your success.”

“That’s the magic of omens,” said the boy. “I’ve seen how the guides read the signs of the desert, and how the soul of the caravan speaks to the soul of the desert.”

In one of the books he learned that the most important text in the literature of alchemy contained only a few lines, and had been inscribed on the surface of an emerald.

“It’s the Emerald Tablet,” said the Englishman, proud that he might teach something to the boy.

“Well, then, why do we need all these books?” the boy asked?

“So that we can understand those few lines,” the Englishman answered, without appearing really to believe what he had said.

This Soul of the World allowed them to understand anything on the face of the earth, because it was the language with which all things communicated. They called that discovery the Master Work—it was part liquid and part solid.

“Can’t you just observe men and omens in order to understand the language?” the boy

asked.

“You have a mania for simplifying everything,” answered the Englishman, irritated.
“Alchemy is a serious discipline. Every step has to be followed exactly as it was followed by the masters.”

The boy thought about the crystal merchant. He had said that it was a good thing for the boy to clean the crystal pieces, so that he could free himself from negative thoughts. The boy was becoming more and more convinced that alchemy could be learned in one’s daily life.

Why do they make things so complicated? He asked the Englishman one night. The boy had noticed that the Englishman was irritable, and missed his books.

“So that those who have the responsibility for understanding can understand...It’s only those who are persistent, and willing to study things deeply, who achieve the Master Work.”

Then one day the boy returned the books to the Englishman, “Did you learn anything?” the Englishman asked, eager to hear what it might be. He needed someone to talk to so as to avoid thinking about the possibility of war.

“I learned that the world has a soul, and that whoever understands that soul can also understand the language of things. I learned that many alchemists realized their Personal Legends, and wound up discovering the Soul of the World, the Philosopher’s Stone, and the Elixir of Life.

“But, above all, I learned that these things are all so simple that they could be written on the surface of an emerald.”

“Go back to watching the caravan,” he said. “That didn’t teach me anything, either.”

The boy went back to contemplating the silence of the desert, and the sand raised by the animals. “Everyone has his or her own way of learning things,” he said to himself. “His way isn’t the same as mine, nor mine as his. But we’re both in search of our Personal Legends, and I respect him for that.”

The camel driver, though, seemed not to be very concerned with the threat of war.

“I’m alive,” he said to the boy, as they ate a bunch of dates one night, with no fires and no moon. “When I’m eating, that’s all I think about. If I’m on the march, I just concentrate on marching. If I have to fight, it will be just as good a day to die as any other.

“Because I don’t live in either my past or my future. I’m interested only in the present. If you can concentrate always on the present, you’ll be a happy man. You’ll see that there is life in the desert, that there are stars in the heavens, and that tribesmen fight because they are part of the human race. Life will be a party for you, a grand festival, because life is the moment we’re living right now.”

“We’ve done it.” said the Englishman, who had also awakened early.

But the boy was quiet. He was at home with the silence of the desert, and he was content just to look at the trees. He still had a long way to go to reach the pyramids, and someday this morning would just be a memory. But this was the present moment—the party the camel driver had mentioned—and he wanted to live it as he did the lessons of his past and his dreams of the future. Although the vision of the date palms would someday be just a memory, right now it signified shade, water, and a refuge from the war. Yesterday, the camel’s groan signaled danger, and now a row of date palms could herald a miracle.

The world speaks many languages, the boy thought.

I don’t know why these things have to be transmitted by word of mouth, he thought. It wasn’t exactly that they were secrets; God revealed his secrets easily to all his creatures.

He had only one explanation for this fact; things have to be transmitted this way because they were made up from the pure life, and this kind of life cannot be captured in pictures or words.

Because people become fascinated with pictures and words, and wind up forgetting the Language of the World.

...the boy thought about his treasure. The closer he got to the realization of his dream, the more difficult things became. It seemed as if what the old king had called “beginner’s luck” were no longer functioning. In his pursuit of the dream, he was being constantly subjected to tests of his persistence and courage. So he could not be hasty, nor impatient. If he pushed forward impulsively, he would fail to see the signs and omens left by God along his path.

God placed them along my path. He had surprised himself with the thought. Until then, he had considered the omens to be things of this world. Like eating or sleeping, or like seeking love or finding a job. He had never thought of them in terms of a language used by God to indicate what he should do.

Because, when you know that language, it’s easy to understand that someone in the world awaits you, whether it’s in the middle of the desert or in some great city. And when two such people encounter each other, and their eyes meet, the past and the future become

unimportant. There is only that moment, and the incredible certainty that everything under the sun has been written by one hand only. It is the hand that evokes love, and creates a twin soul for every person in the world. Without such love, one's dreams would have no meaning.

Maktub thought the boy.

The next day, the boy returned to the well, hoping to see the girl. To his surprise, the Englishman was there, looking out at the desert.

"I waited all afternoon and evening," he said. "He appeared with the first stars of evening. I told him what I was seeking, and he asked me if I had ever transformed lead into gold. I told him that was what I had come here to learn.

"He told me I should try to do so. That's all he said: 'Go and try,'"

The boy didn't say anything. The poor Englishman had traveled all this way, only to be told that he should repeat what he had already done so many times.

"So, then try," he said to the Englishman.

"That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to start now."

"The day after we met," Fatima said, "you told me that you loved me. Then, you taught me something of the universal language and the Soul of the World, Because of that, I have become a part of you..."

"I have been waiting for you here at this oasis for a long time. I have forgotten about my past, about my traditions, and the way in which men of the desert expect women to behave. Ever since I was a child, I have dreamed that the desert would bring me a wonderful present. Now, my present has arrived, and it's you..."

"You have told me about your dreams, about the old king and your treasure. And you've told me about omens. So now, I fear nothing, because it was those omens that brought you to me. And I am a part of your dream, a part of your Personal Legend, as you call it.

"That's why I want you to continue toward your goal. If you have to wait until the war is over, then wait. But if you have to go before then, go on in pursuit of your dream. The dunes are changed by the wind, but the desert never changes. That's the way it will be with our love for each other.

"Maktub," she said. "If I am really a part of your dream, you'll come back one day."

"The desert takes our men from us, and they don't always return," she said. "We know

that, and we are used to it. Those who don't return become a part of the clouds, a part of the animals that hide in the ravines and of the water that comes from the earth. They become a part of everything...they become the Soul of the World.

"Some do come back. And then the other women are happy because they believe that their men may one day return, as well I used to look at those women and envy them their happiness. Now, I too will be one of the women who wait.

"I'm a desert woman, and I'm proud of that. I want my husband to wander as free as the wind that shapes the dunes. And, if I have to, I will accept the fact that he has become a part of the clouds, and the animals, and the water of the desert."

"This is the first phase of the job," he said. "I have to separate out the sulfur. To do that successfully, I must have no fear of failure. It was my fear of failure that first kept me from attempting the Master Work. Now, I'm beginning what I could have started ten years ago. But I'm happy at least that I didn't wait twenty years."

"I am learning the Language of the World, and everything in the world is beginning to make sense to me...even the flight of the hawks," he said to himself. And, in that mood, he was grateful to be in love. When you are in love, things make even more sense, he thought.

Then, one day, the oldest seer he had ever sought out (and the one most to be feared) had asked why the camel driver was so interested in the future.

"Well...so I can do things," he had responded, "And so I can change those things that I don't want to happen,"

"But then they wouldn't be a part of your future," the seer had said.

"Well, maybe I just want to know the future so I can prepare myself for what's coming."

"If good things are coming, they will be a pleasant surprise," said the seer. "If bad things are, and you know in advance, you will suffer greatly before they even occur."

"I want to know about the future because I'm a man," the camel driver had said to the seer. "And men always live their lives based on the future,"

"When people consult me, it's not that I'm reading the future; I am guessing at the future. The future belongs to God, and it is only he who reveals it, under extraordinary circumstances. How do I guess at the future? Based on the omens of the present. The secret is here in the present. If you pay attention to the present, you can improve upon it. And, if you improve on the present, what comes later will also be better. Forget about the future, and live each day according to the teachings, confident that God loves his children. Each day, in itself, brings with it an eternity.

“Go and speak to the tribal chieftains,” said the camel driver. “Tell them about the armies that are approaching,”

“They’ll laugh at me.”

“They are men of the desert, and the men of the desert are used to dealing with omens.”

“Well, then, they probably already know.”

“They’re not concerned with that right now. They believe that if they have to know about something Allah wants them to know, someone will tell them about it. It has happened many times before. But, this time, the person is you.”

“Who is this stranger who speaks of omens?” asked one of the chieftains, eyeing the boy.

“It is I,” the boy answered. And he told what he had seen.

“Why would the desert reveal such things to a stranger, when it knows that we have been here for generations?” said another of the chieftains.

“Because my eyes are not yet accustomed to the desert,” the boy said. “I can see things that eyes habituated to the desert might not see.”

And also because I know about the Soul of the World, he thought to himself.

Every day was there to be lived or to mark one’s departure from this world. Everything depended on one word: “Maktub.”

“Why did you read the flight of the birds?”

“I read only what the birds wanted to tell me. They wanted to save the oasis. Tomorrow all of you will die, because there are more men at the oasis than you have.”

The sword remained where it was, “Who are you to change what Allah has willed?”

“Allah created the armies, and he also created the hawks. Allah taught me the language of the birds. Everything has been written by the same hand,” the boy said, remembering the camel driver’s words.

The stranger withdrew the sword from the boy’s forehead, and the boy felt immensely relieved. But he still couldn’t flee.

“Be careful with your prognostications,” said the stranger. “When something is written, there is no way to change it.”

“All I saw was an army,” said the boy. “I didn’t see the outcome of the battle.”

“What is a stranger doing in a strange land?”

“I am following my Personal Legend. It’s not something you would understand.”

The stranger placed his sword in its scabbard, and the boy relaxed.

“I had to test your courage,” the stranger said. “Courage is the quality most essential to understanding the Language of the World.”

“You must not let up, even after having come so far,” he continued. “You must love the desert, but never trust it completely. Because the desert tests all men: it challenges every step, and kills those who become distracted.”

“When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream,” said the alchemist, echoing the words of the old king. The boy understood. Another person was there to help him toward his Personal Legend.

“So you are going to instruct me?”

“No. You already know all you need to know. I am only going to point you in the direction of your treasure.”

“I have already found my treasure. I have a camel. I have my money from the crystal shop, and I have fifty gold pieces. In my own country. I would be a rich man.”

“But none of that is from the Pyramids,” said the alchemist.

“I also have Fatima. She is a treasure greater than anything else I have won.”

“She wasn’t found at the Pyramids, either.”

“It’s not what enters men’s mouths that’s evil,” said the alchemist, “It’s what comes out of their mouths that is.”

“Drink and enjoy yourself,” said the alchemist, noticing that the boy was feeling happier.

“Rest well tonight, as if you were a warrior preparing for combat. Remember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure. You’ve got to find the treasure, so that everything you have learned along the way can make sense.”

He said to the boy, "Show me where there is life out in the desert. Only those who can see such signs of life are able to find treasure...Life attracts life."

"There's life here," the boy said to the alchemist. "I don't know the language of the desert, but my horse knows the language of life."

"You found life in the desert, the omen that I needed."

"Why was that so important?"

"Because the Pyramids are surrounded by the desert."

"I'm going to guide you across the desert," the alchemist said.

"I want to stay at the oasis," the boy answered. "I've found Fatima, and, as far as I'm concerned, she's worth more than treasure."

"Fatima is a woman of the desert," said the alchemist. "She knows that men have to go away in order to return. And she already has her treasure: it's you. Now she expects that you will find what it is you're looking for."

"Well, what if I decide to stay?"

"Let me tell you what will happen. You'll be the counselor of the oasis. You have enough gold to buy many sheep and many camels. You'll marry Fatima, and you'll both be happy for a year. You'll learn to love the desert, and you'll get to know every one of the fifty thousand palms. You'll watch them as they grow, demonstrating how the world is always changing. And you'll get better and better at understanding omens, because the desert is the best teacher there is.

"Sometime during the second year, you'll remember about the treasure. The omens will begin insistently to speak of it, and you'll try to ignore them. You'll use your knowledge for the welfare of the oasis and its inhabitants. The tribal chieftains will appreciate what you do. And your camels will bring you wealth and power.

"During the third year, the omens will continue to speak of your treasure and your Personal Legend. You'll walk around, night after night, at the oasis, and Fatima will be unhappy because she'll feel it was she who interrupted your quest. But you will love her, and she'll return your love. You'll remember that she never asked you to stay, because a woman of the desert knows that she must await her man. So you won't blame her. But many times you'll walk the sands of the desert, thinking that maybe you could have left...that you could have trusted more in your love for Fatima. Because what kept you at

the oasis was your own fear that you might never come back. At that point, the omens will tell you that your treasure is buried forever.

“Then, sometime during the fourth year, the omens will abandon you, because you’ve stopped listening to them. The tribal chieftains will see that, and you’ll be dismissed from your position as counselor. But, by then, you’ll be a rich merchant, with many camels and a great deal of merchandise. You’ll spend the rest of your days knowing that you didn’t pursue your Personal Legend, and that now it’s too late.

“You must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his Personal Legend. If he abandons that pursuit, it’s because it wasn’t true love...the love that speaks the Language of the World.”

“I’m going away,” he said. “And I want you to know that I’m coming back. I love you because...”

“Don’t say anything,” Fatima interrupted. “One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving.”

But the boy continued, “I had a dream, and I met with a king. I sold crystal and crossed the desert. And, because the tribes declared war, I went to the well, seeking the alchemist. So, I love you because the entire universe conspired to help me find you.”

The two embraced. It was the first time either had touched the other.

“I’ll be back,” the boy said.

Don’t think about what you’ve left behind, the alchemist said to the boy as they began to ride across the sands of the desert. “Everything is written in the Soul of the World, and there it will stay forever.”

“If what one finds is made of pure matter, it will never spoil. And one can always come back. If what you had found was only a moment of light, like the explosion of a star, you would find nothing on your return.”

The man was speaking the language of alchemy. But the boy knew that he was referring to Fatima.

“There is only one way to learn,” the alchemist answered. “It’s through action. Everything you need to know you have learned through your journey. You need to learn only one thing more.”

“And what went wrong when other alchemists tried to make gold and were unable to do

so?”

“They were looking only for gold,” his companion answered. “They were seeking the treasure of their Personal Legend, without wanting actually to live out the Personal Legend.”

“I’m an alchemist simply because I’m an alchemist,” he said, as he prepared the meal. “I learned the science from my grandfather, who learned from his father, and so on, back to the creation of the world. In those times, the Master Work could be written simply on an emerald. But men began to reject simple things, and to write tracts, interpretations, and philosophical studies. They also began to feel that they knew a better way than others had. Yet the Emerald Tablet is still alive today.”

“What was written on the Emerald Tablet?” the boy wanted to know...

“This is what was written on the Emerald Tablet,” said the alchemist, when he had finished.

The boy tried to read what was written in the sand.

“It’s a code,” said the boy, a bit disappointed. “It looks like what I saw in the Englishman’s books.”

“No,” the alchemist answered. “It’s like the flight of those two hawks; it can’t be understood by reason alone. The Emerald Tablet is a direct passage to the Soul of the World.”

“The wise men understood that this natural world is only an image and a copy of paradise. The existence of this world is simply a guarantee that there exists a world that is perfect. God created the world so that, through its visible objects, men could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom. That’s what I mean by action.”

“Should I understand the Emerald Tablet?” the boy asked.

“Perhaps, if you were in a laboratory of alchemy, this would be the right time to study the best way to understand the Emerald Tablet. But you are in the desert. So immerse yourself in it. The desert will give you an understanding of the world; in fact, anything on the face of the earth will do that. You don’t even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation.”

“How do I immerse myself in the desert?”

“Listen to your heart. It knows all things, because it came from the Soul of the World, and it will one day return there.”

“Why do we have to listen to our hearts?” the boy asked, when they had made camp that day.

“Because, wherever your heart is, that is where you’ll find your treasure.”

“But my heart is agitated,” the boy said. “It has its dreams, it gets emotional, and it’s become passionate over a woman of the desert. It asks things of me, and it keeps me from sleeping many nights, when I’m thinking about her.”

“Well, that’s good. Your heart is alive. Keep listening to what it has to say.”

“My heart is a traitor,” the boy said to the alchemist, when they had paused to rest the horses. “It doesn’t want me to go on.”

“That makes sense,” the alchemist answered. “Naturally it’s afraid that, in pursuing your dream, you might lose everything you’ve won,”

“Well, then, why should I listen to my heart?”

“Because you will never again be able to keep it quiet. Even if you pretend not to have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you, repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world.”

“You mean I should listen, even if it’s treasonous?”

“Treason is a blow that comes unexpectedly. If you know your heart well, it will never be able to do that to you. Because you’ll know its dreams and wishes, and will know how to deal with them.

“You will never be able to escape from your heart. So it’s better to listen to what it has to say. That way, you’ll never have to fear an unanticipated blow.”

The boy continued to listen to his heart as they crossed the desert. He came to understand its dodges and tricks, and to accept it as it was. He lost his fear, and forgot about his need to go back to the oasis, because, one afternoon, his heart told him that it was happy.

“Even though I complain sometimes,” it said, “it’s because I’m the heart of a person, and people’s hearts are that way. People are afraid to pursue their most important dreams, because they feel that they don’t deserve them, or that they’ll be unable to achieve them. We, their hearts, become fearful just thinking of loved ones who go away forever, or of moments that could have been good but weren’t, or of treasures that might have been found but were forever hidden in the sands. Because, when these things happen, we suffer terribly.”

“My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer,” the boy told the alchemist one night as they looked up at the moonless sky.

“Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity.”

“Every second of the search is an encounter with God,” the boy told his heart. “When I have been truly searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous, because I’ve known that every hour was a part of the dream that I would find it. When I have been truly searching for my treasure, I’ve discovered things along the way that I never would have seen had I not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve.”

...his heart began to tell him things that came from the Soul of the World. It said that all people who are happy have God within them. And that happiness could be found in a grain of sand from the desert, as the alchemist had said. Because a grain of sand is a moment of creation, and the universe has taken millions of years to create it. “Everyone on earth has a treasure that awaits him,” his heart said. “We, people’s hearts, seldom say much about those treasures, because people no longer want to go in search of them. We speak of them only to children. Later, we simply let life proceed, in its own direction, toward its own fate. But, unfortunately, very few follow the path laid out for them—the path to their Personal Legends, and to happiness. Most people see the world as a threatening place, and, because they do, the world turns out, indeed, to be a threatening place.

“So, we, their hearts, speak more and more softly. We never stop speaking out, but we begin to hope that our words won’t be heard: we don’t want people to suffer because they don’t follow their hearts.”

“Why don’t people’s hearts tell them to continue to follow their dreams?” the boy asked the alchemist.

“Because that’s what makes a heart suffer most, and hearts don’t like to suffer.”

“Is that the one thing I still needed to know?”

“No,” the alchemist answered. “What you still need to know is this: before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World tests everything that was learned along the way. It does this not because it is evil, but so that we can, in addition to realizing our dreams, master the lessons we’ve learned as we’ve moved toward that dream. That’s the point at which most people give up. It’s the point at which, as we say in the language of the desert, one ‘dies of thirst just when the palm trees have appeared on the horizon.”

“Every search begins with beginner’s luck. And every search ends with the victor’s being

severely tested.”

“To show you one of life’s simple lessons,” the alchemist answered. “When you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed.”

“Does a man’s heart always help him?” the boy asked the alchemist.

“Mostly just the hearts of those who are trying to realize their Personal Legends. But they do help children, drunkards, and the elderly, too.”

“Does that mean that I’ll never run into danger?”

“It means only that the heart does what it can,” the alchemist said.

The alchemist sounded angry: “Trust in your heart, but never forget that you’re in the desert. When men are at war with one another, the Soul of the World can hear the screams of battle. No one fails to suffer the consequences of everything under the sun.”

“If we’re going to go our separate ways soon,” the boy said, “then teach me about alchemy.”

“You already know about alchemy. It is about penetrating to the Soul of the World, and discovering the treasure that has been reserved for you.”

“Don’t give in to your fears,” said the alchemist, in a strangely gentle voice. “If you do, you won’t be able to talk to your heart.”

“But I have no idea how to turn myself into the wind.”

“If a person is living out his Personal Legend, he knows everything he needs to know. There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve; the fear of failure.”

“I’m not afraid of failing. It’s just that I don’t know how to turn myself into the wind.”

“Well, you’ll have to learn; your life depends on it.”

“But what if I can’t?”

“Then you’ll die in the midst of trying to realize your Personal Legend. That’s a lot better than dying like millions of other people, who never even knew what their Personal Legends were.

“But don’t worry,” the alchemist continued. “Usually the threat of death makes people a

lot more aware of their lives.”

“I still have no idea how to turn myself into the wind,” the boy repeated.

“Remember what I told you: the world is only the visible aspect of God. And that what alchemy does is to bring spiritual perfection into contact with the material plane.”

“What are you doing?”

“Feeding my falcon.”

“If I’m not able to turn myself into the wind, we’re going to die,” the boy said. “Why feed your falcon?”

“You’re the one who may die,” the alchemist said. “I already know how to turn myself into the wind.”

“What do you want here today?” the desert asked him. “Didn’t you spend enough time looking at me yesterday?”

“Somewhere you are holding the person I love,” the boy said. “So, when I look out over your sands, I am also looking at her. I want to return to her, and I need your help so that I can turn myself into the wind.”

“What is love?” the desert asked.

“Love is the falcon’s flight over your sands. Because for him, you are a green field, from which he always returns with game. He knows your rocks, your dunes, and your mountains, and you are generous to him.”

“The falcon’s beak carries bits of me, myself,” the desert said. “For years, I care for his game, feeding it with the little water that I have, and then I show him where the game is. And, one day, as I enjoy the fact that his game thrives on my surface, the falcon dives out of the sky, and takes away what I’ve created.”

“But that’s why you created the game in the first place,” the boy answered. “To nourish the falcon. And the falcon then nourishes man. And, eventually, man will nourish your sands, where the game will once again flourish. That’s how the world goes.”

“So is that what love is?”

“Yes, that’s what love is. It’s what makes the game become the falcon, the falcon become man, and man, in his turn, the desert. It’s what turns lead into gold, and makes the gold return to the earth.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” the desert said.

“But you can at least understand that somewhere in your sands there is a woman waiting for me. And that’s why I have to turn myself into the wind.”

The desert didn’t answer him for a few moments.

Then it told him, “I’ll give you my sands to help the wind to blow, but, alone, I can’t do anything. You have to ask for help from the wind.”

The wind approached the boy and touched his face. It knew of the boy’s talk with the desert, because the winds know everything. They blow across the world without a birthplace, and with no place to die.

“Help me,” the boy said. “One day you carried the voice of my loved one to me.”

“Who taught you to speak the language of the desert and the wind?”

“My heart,” the boy answered.

“You can’t be the wind,” the wind said. “We’re two very different things.”

“That’s not true,” the boy said. “I learned the alchemist’s secrets in my travels. I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe. We were all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul. I want to be like you, able to reach every corner of the world, cross the seas, blow away the sands that cover my treasure, and carry the voice of the woman I love.”

“I heard what you were talking about the other day with the alchemist,” the wind said.

“He said that everything has its own Personal Legend. But people can’t turn themselves into the wind.”

“Just teach me to be the wind for a few moments,” the boy said. “So you and I can talk about the limitless possibilities of people and the winds.”

The wind’s curiosity was aroused, something that had never happened before. It wanted to talk about those things, but it didn’t know how to turn a man into the wind. And look how many things the wind already knew how to do! It created deserts, sank ships, felled entire forests, and blew through cities filled with music and strange noises. It felt that it had no limits, yet here was a boy saying that there were other things the wind should be able to do.

“This is what we call love,” the boy said, seeing that the wind was close to granting what he requested. “When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you are loved, there’s no need at all to understand what’s happening, because everything happens within you, and even men can turn themselves into the wind. As long as the wind helps,

of course.”

The wind was a proud being, and it was becoming irritated with what the boy was saying. It commenced to blow harder, raising the desert sands. But finally it had to recognize that, even making its way around the world, it didn’t know how to turn a man into the wind. And it knew nothing about love.”

“In my travels around the world, I’ve often seen people speaking of love and looking toward the heavens,” the wind said, furious at having to acknowledge its own limitations. “Maybe it’s better to ask heaven,”

“Well then, help me do that,” the boy said. “Fill this place with a sandstorm so strong that it blots out the sun. Then I can look to heaven without blinding myself.”

So the wind blew with all its strength, and the sky was filled with sand. The sun was turned into a golden disk.

“The wind told me that you know about love,” the boy said to the sun. “If you know about love, you must also know about the Soul of the World, because it’s made of love.”

“From where I am,” the sun said. “I can see the Soul of the World. It communicates with my soul, and together we cause the plants to grow and the sheep to seek out shade. From where I am—and I’m a long way from the earth—I learned how to love. I know that if I came even a little bit closer to the earth, everything there would die, and the Soul of the World would no longer exist. So we contemplate each other, and we want each other, and I give it life and warmth, and it gives me my reason for living.”

“So you know about love,” the boy said.

“And I know the Soul of the World, because we have talked at great length to each other during this endless trip through the universe. It tells me that its greatest problem is that, up until now, only the minerals and vegetables understand that all things are one. That there’s no need for iron to be the same as copper, or copper the same as gold. Each performs its own exact function as a unique being, and everything would be a symphony of peace if the hand that wrote all this had stopped on the fifth day of creation.”

“But there was a sixth day,” the sun went on.

“You are wise, because you observe everything from a distance,” the boy said. “But you don’t know about love. If there hadn’t been a sixth day, man would not exist; copper would always be just copper, and lead just lead. It’s true that everything has its Personal Legend, but one day that Personal Legend will be realized. So each thing has to transform itself into something better, and to acquire a new Personal Legend, until, someday, the Soul of the World becomes one thing only.”

The sun thought about that, and decided to shine more brightly. The wind, which was enjoying the conversation, started to blow with greater force, so that the sun would not blind the boy.

“This is why alchemy exists,” the boy said. “So that everyone will search for his treasure, find it, and then want to be better than he was in his former life. Lead will play its role until the world has no further need for lead; and then lead will have to turn itself into gold.

“That’s what alchemists do. They show that, when we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better, too.”

“Well, why did you say that I don’t know about love?” the sun asked the boy.

“Because it’s not love to be static like the desert, nor is it love to roam the world like the wind. And it’s not love to see everything from a distance, like you do. Love is the force that transforms and improves the Soul of the World. When I first reached through to it, I thought the Soul of the World was perfect. But later, I could see that it was like other aspects of creation, and had its own passions and wars. It is we who nourish the Soul of the World, and the world we live in will be either better or worse, depending on whether we become better or worse. And that’s where the power of love comes in. Because when we love, we always strive to become better than we are.”

“So what do you want of me?” the sun asked.

“I want you to help me turn myself into the wind,” the boy answered.

“Nature knows me as the wisest being in creation,” the sun said. “But I don’t know how to turn you into the wind.”

“Then, whom should I ask?”

The sun thought for a minute. The wind was listening closely, and wanted to tell every corner of the world that the sun’s wisdom had its limitations. That it was unable to deal with this boy who spoke the Language of the World.

“Speak to the hand that wrote all,” said the sun.

The wind screamed with delight, and blew harder than ever. The tents were being blown from their ties to the earth, and the animals were being freed from their tethers. On the cliff, the men clutched at each other as they sought to keep from being blown away,

The boy turned to the hand that wrote all. As he did so, he sensed that the universe had fallen silent, and he decided not to speak.

A current of love rushed from his heart, and the boy began to pray. It was a prayer that he had never said before, because it was a prayer without words or pleas. His prayer didn't give thanks for his sheep having found new pastures; it didn't ask that the boy be able to sell more crystal; and it didn't beseech that the woman he had met continue to await his return. In the silence, the boy understood that the desert, the wind, and the sun were also trying to understand the signs written by the hand, and were seeking to follow their paths, and to understand what had been written on a single emerald. He saw that omens were scattered throughout the earth and in space, and that there was no reason or significance attached to their appearance; he could see that not the deserts, nor the winds, nor the sun, nor people knew why they had been created. But that the hand had a reason for all of this, and that only the hand could perform miracles, or transform the sea into a desert...or a man into the wind. Because only the hand understood that it was a larger design that had moved the universe to the point at which six days of creation had evolved into a Master Work.

The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles.

The simum blew that day as it had never blown before. For generations thereafter, the Arabs recounted the legend of a boy who had turned himself into the wind, almost destroying a military camp, in defiance of the most powerful chief in the desert.

When the simum ceased to blow, everyone looked to the place where the boy had been. But he was no longer there; he was standing next to a sand-covered sentinel, on the far side of the camp.

"From here on, you will be alone," the alchemist said. "You are only three hours from the Pyramids."

"Thank you," said the boy. "You taught me the Language of the World."

"I only invoked what you already knew."

I want to tell you a story about dreams, said the alchemist.

The boy brought his horse closer.

"In ancient Rome, at the time of Emperor Tiberius, there lived a good man who had two sons. One was in the military, and had been sent to the most distant regions of the empire. The other son was a poet, and delighted all of Rome with his beautiful verses.

"One night, the father had a dream. An angel appeared to him, and told him that the words of one of his sons would be learned and repeated throughout the world for all generations to come. The father woke from his dream grateful and crying, because life

was generous, and had revealed to him something any father would be proud to know.

“Shortly thereafter, the father died as he tried to save a child who was about to be crushed by the wheels of a chariot. Since he had lived his entire life in a manner that was correct and fair, he went directly to heaven, where he met the angel that had appeared in his dream.

“‘You were always a good man,’ the angel said to him. ‘You lived your life in a loving way, and died with dignity, I can now grant you any wish you desire.’

“‘Life was good to me,’ the man said. ‘When you appeared in my dream, I felt that all my efforts had been rewarded, because my son’s poems will be read by men for generations to come. I don’t want anything for myself. But any father would be proud of the fame achieved by one whom he had cared for as a child, and educated as he grew up. Sometime in the distant future, I would like to see my son’s words.’

“The angel touched the man’s shoulder, and they were both projected far into the future, They were in an immense setting, surrounded by thousands of people speaking a strange language.

“The man wept with happiness.

“‘I knew that my son’s poems were immortal,’ he said to the angel through his tears. ‘Can you please tell me which of my son’s poems these people are repeating?’

“The angel came closer to the man, and, with tenderness, led him to a bench nearby, where they sat down.

“‘The verses of your son who was the poet were very popular in Rome,’ the angel said, ‘Everyone loved them and enjoyed them. But when the reign of Tiberius ended, his poems were forgotten. The words you’re hearing now are those of your son in the military.’

“The man looked at the angel in surprise.

“‘Your son went to serve at a distant place, and became a centurion. He was just and good. One afternoon, one of his servants fell ill, and it appeared that he would die. Your son had heard of a rabbi who was able to cure illnesses, and he rode out for days and days in search of this man. Along the way, he learned that the man he was seeking was the Son of God. He met others who had been cured by him, and they instructed your son in the man’s teachings. And so, despite the fact that he was a Roman centurion, he converted to their faith. Shortly thereafter, he reached the place where the man he was looking for was visiting.’

“‘He told the man that one of his servants was gravely ill, and the rabbi made ready to go to his house with him. But the centurion was a man of faith, and, looking into the eyes of

the rabbi, he knew that he was surely in the presence of the Son of God.’

“‘And this is what your son said,’ the angel told the man. ‘These are the words he said to the rabbi at that point, and they have never been forgotten: “My Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof. But only speak a word and my servant will be healed.”’

The alchemist said, “No matter what he does, every person on earth plays a central role in the history of the world. And normally he doesn’t know it.”

The boy smiled. He had never imagined that questions about life would be of such importance to a shepherd.

As he was about to climb yet another dune, his heart whispered, “Be aware of the place where you are brought to tears. That’s where I am, and that’s where your treasure is.”

When he reached the top of the dune, his heart leapt. There, illuminated by the light of the moon and the brightness of the desert, stood the solemn and majestic Pyramids of Egypt.

The boy fell to his knees and wept. He thanked God for making him believe in his Personal Legend, and for leading him to meet a king, a merchant, an Englishman, and an alchemist. And above all for his having met a woman of the desert who had told him that love would never keep a man from his Personal Legend.

But here he was, at the point of finding his treasure, and he reminded himself that no project is completed until its objective has been achieved. The boy looked at the sands around him, and saw that, where his tears had fallen, a scarab beetle was scuttling through the sand. During his time in the desert, he had learned that, in Egypt, the scarab beetles are a symbol of God.

Throughout the night, the boy dug at the place he had chosen, but found nothing. He felt weighted down by the centuries of time since the Pyramids had been built. But he didn’t stop. He struggled to continue digging as he fought the wind, which often blew the sand back into the excavation. His hands were abraded and exhausted, but he listened to his heart. It had told him to dig where his tears fell.

As he was attempting to pull out the rocks he encountered, he heard footsteps. Several figures approached him. Their backs were to the moonlight, and the boy could see neither their eyes nor their faces.

“What are you doing here?” one of the figures demanded.

Because he was terrified, the boy didn't answer. He had found where his treasure was, and was frightened at what might happen.

"We're refugees from the tribal wars, and we need money," the other figure said.

"What are you hiding there?"

"I'm not hiding anything," the boy answered.

But one of them seized the boy and yanked him back out of the hole. Another, who was searching the boy's bags, found the piece of gold.

"There's gold here," he said.

The moon shone on the face of the Arab who had seized him, and in the man's eyes the boy saw death.

"He's probably got more gold hidden in the ground."

They made the boy continue digging, but he found nothing. As the sun rose, the men began to beat the boy. He was bruised and bleeding, his clothing was torn to shreds, and he felt that death was near.

"What good is money to you if you're going to die? It's not often that money can save someone's life," the alchemist had said. Finally, the boy screamed at the men, "I'm digging for treasure!" And, although his mouth was bleeding and swollen, he told his attackers that he had twice dreamed of a treasure hidden near the Pyramids of Egypt.

The man who appeared to be the leader of the group spoke to one of the others: "Leave him. He doesn't have anything else. He must have stolen this gold."

The boy fell to the sand, nearly unconscious. The leader shook him and said, "We're leaving."

But before they left, he came back to the boy and said, "You're not going to die. You'll live, and you'll learn that a man shouldn't be so stupid. Two years ago, right here on this spot, I had a recurrent dream, too. I dreamed that I should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and I was told that, if I dug at the roots of the sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream."

...now he knew where his treasure was.

The boy reached the small, abandoned church just as night was falling. The sycamore

was still there in the sacristy, and the stars could still be seen through the half-destroyed roof. He remembered the time he had been there with his sheep; it had been a peaceful night...except for the dream.

“You old sorcerer,” the boy shouted up to the sky. “You knew the whole story. You even left a bit of gold at the monastery so I could get back to this church. The monk laughed when he saw me come back in tatters. Couldn’t you have saved me from that?”

“No,” he heard a voice on the wind say. “If I had told you, you wouldn’t have seen the Pyramids. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

The boy smiled, and continued digging. Half an hour later, his shovel hit something solid. An hour later, he had before him a chest of Spanish gold coins. There were also precious stones, gold masks adorned with red and white feathers, and stone statues embedded with jewels. The spoils of a conquest that the country had long ago forgotten, and that some conquistador had failed to tell his children about.

It’s true; life really is generous to those who pursue their Personal Legend, the boy thought. Then he remembered that he had to get to Tarifa so he could give one-tenth of his treasure to the Gypsy woman, as he had promised. “Those Gypsies are really smart,” he thought. Maybe it was because they moved around so much.

The wind began to blow again. It was the levanter, the wind that came from Africa. It didn’t bring with it the smell of the desert, nor the threat of Moorish invasion. Instead, it brought the scent of a perfume he knew well, and the touch of a kiss—a kiss that came from far away, slowly, slowly, until it rested on his lips.

The boy smiled. It was the first time she had done that.

“I’m coming, Fatima,” he said.